

SAINT LOUIS IX

KING OF FRANCE, CONFESSOR

Died in A.D. 1270

Edited by Rev Alban Butler.

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IN the person of Saint Louis IX were united the qualities that form a great king, a hero of romance, and a saint. He was endowed with qualifications for good government, he excelled in the arts of peace and in those of war, and his courage and greatness of mind received from his virtue the highest setting; ambition had no share in his enterprises, his only motives in them was the glory of God and the good of his subjects. Though the two crusades in which he was engaged were failures, he is certainly to be ranked among the most valiant of princes and is a perfect example of the good and great medieval nobleman. He was son of Louis VIII and was eight years old when the death of his grandfather, Philip II Augustus, put his father in possession of the crown of France.

He was born at Poissy on April 25, 1215. Because he had been made a Christian at Poissy by the grace of baptism, he afterwards honored that place above others. He took pleasure in bestowing charities and doing other good actions there and, in his letters and private transactions, he signed himself, "Louis of Poissy." His mother was Blanche, daughter of Alfonso of Castile and Eleanor of England, and, to her care and attention in the education of Saint Louis, we are indebted, under God, for the great example of his virtues. From his birth she would never suffer him to be put out to nurse, and gave all possible attention to his education and that of her other children. She appointed his tutors, from whom he became a master in the Latin tongue. He learned to speak in public and to write with grace and dignity. He was also instructed in the arts of war, the arts of government, and all the accomplishments of a king. However, it was his mother's first care to instill into his soul the highest regard and awe for everything that pertained to divine worship, religion and virtue, and a particular love of chastity. She used often to say to him when he was a child, "I love you, my dear son, as much as a mother can love her child; but I would rather see you dead at my feet than that you should ever commit a mortal sin." Louis did not forget the lesson.

His friend and biographer, the Sieur de Joinville, historian of the Crusades, relates that the King once asked him, in the presence of some friars, "What is God?"

Joinville replied, "That which is so good that there could be nothing better."

He responded, "Well said. Now tell me, would you rather be a leper or commit a mortal sin?"

"And I, who never told a lie," says Joinville, "answered, 'I would rather commit thirty mortal sins than be a leper.'" Later Louis led him aside and took him to task for his honest but misguided reply.

King Louis VIII died on November 7, 1226, and Queen Blanche was declared regent for her son, who was then only eleven years old.

To prevent seditions she hastened the ceremony of his coronation, which was performed at

Reims on the first Sunday of Advent by the Bishop of Soissons, the archbishopric of Reims being then vacant. The young King trembled in taking the coronation oath, begging of God resolution, light, and strength to employ his authority according to his obligations, for the divine honor, the defense of the Church, and the good of his people. Several of the feudal lords of the kingdom, thinking to take the opportunity of the King's minority, entered into a confederation, and made many extravagant demands. None of these would be present at the coronation, and they appeared in arms soon after it was over. The chief were Philip, Count of Boulogne, a natural son of Philip Augustus, Peter Mauclerc, who was Count of Brittany, Raymund of Languedoc, Hugh of Lusignan, Count of La Marche, and Thibault, Count of Champagne, afterwards King of Navarre. The whole time of the King's minority was disturbed by these ambitious barons, but Blanche by several alliances and by her courage and diligence overcame them in the field and forced their submission. Louis rejoiced in his victories chiefly because he procured by them the blessings of peace to his subjects.

He was merciful even to rebels, and by his readiness to receive any proposals of agreement gave the proof that he neither sought revenge nor conquests. Never had any man a greater love for the Church, or a greater veneration for its ministers. Yet this was not blind; he opposed the injustices of bishops, when he saw them betrayed into any, and did not listen to their complaints till he had given a full hearing to the other party, as he showed in the contests of the Bishops of Beauvais and Metz with the corporations of those cities.

In 1240, Pope Gregory IX, in the broils the Emperor Frederick II had raised about the investitures of bishops, wrote to Saint Louis and proposed Robert, the King's brother, as emperor in Frederick's place. Louis did not accept the proposal and continued to interest himself in procuring a reconciliation of the Emperor to the Holy See. When Cardinal Fieschi, a Genoese, was elected under the name of Innocent IV, these struggles were yet more bitter, and the Pope at the Council of Lyons in 1245 ex-communicated Frederick II and took away his imperial crown. However, Saint Louis would not interfere on either side. He continued to treat the Emperor as such, and bent all his energies towards peace and to diverting these energies into a crusade against the Saracens.

This good King was never as happy as when he enjoyed the conversation of holy priests or other religious men, and he often invited such to his house, but he knew how to observe seasons with a decent liberty. Once when a friar had started a grave religious topic at table, he turned the discourse to another subject, saying, "All things have their time."

He celebrated feasts and rejoicings on the creation of knights and other such occasions with great magnificence, but banished from his court all diversions dangerous to morals. And he would tolerate neither vulgar obscenity nor thoughtless profanity; "I was a good twenty-two years in the holy King's company," says Joinville, "and never once did I hear him swear, either by God or His mother or His saints. I did not even hear him name the Devil, except if he met the word when reading aloud or when discussing what had been read."

A Dominican testified that he had never heard him speak ill naturedly of anyone. When he was urged to put to death the rebel son of Hugh de la Marche, he refused, saying, "A son cannot refuse to obey his father's orders."

When he was nineteen Saint Louis married Margaret, the eldest daughter of Raymund Berenger, Count of Provence, whose second daughter, Eleanor, was married to Henry III, King of England;

his third, Sanchia, to his brother Richard of Cornwall, afterwards King of the Romans ; and Beatrice, the youngest, to Charles, brother to Saint Louis. The marriage was celebrated on May 27, 1234, at Sens, and God blessed it with a happy union of hearts and eleven children (five sons and six daughters) from whose descendants kings were given to France until that January 21, 1793, when the Abbé Edgeworth said to Louis XVI as the guillotine was about to fall, "Son of Saint Louis, go up to Heaven!" Two years later, having come of age, Saint Louis took the government of his kingdom into his own hands. However, he continued to show the greatest deference to his mother, and to profit by her counsel, though Blanche was inclined to be jealous of and unkind to her daughter-in-law.

The first of many religious foundations for which Louis was responsible was the abbey of Royaumont. His father had ordered in his will that the price of his jewels should be laid out in founding a monastery; Saint Louis very much increased that sum, and made the foundation truly royal and magnificent. This was one of those places to which he frequently retired for solitude and to attend to God with more perfect recollection.

Louis brought the Carthusians to Paris and endowed them with the palace of Vauvert. He also helped his mother in the foundation of the convent of Maubuisson.

In 1239 Baldwin II, the Latin Emperor of Constantinople, made Saint Louis (in gratitude for his largesse to the Christians in Palestine and other parts of the East) a present of the Crown of Thorns.*

** This relic was formerly kept in the imperial palace but was then in the hands of the Venetians as a pledge for a loan of money to Baldwin, which Louis had to discharge.*

Louis sent two Dominican friars to bring this treasure to France and met it himself beyond Sens, attended by his whole court and numerous clergy. To house it, he pulled down his chapel of Saint Nicholas and built the Sainte Chapelle, which is now empty of its relic.

What remains of it is now in Notre Dame de Paris and is, in fact, only part of the rush foundation, with no thorns thereon. Several of these were given away by Saint Louis in golden reliquaries. One is in the British Museum and appears still to contain the thorn it was made to enshrine.

After the Revolution what remained of the crown or its rush foundation was brought to light in 1805 through the compunction of an "insufficiently apostatized" priest, the Abbé Cottarel.

Several ordinances of this prince show us how much he applied himself to see justice well administered. In succeeding reigns, whenever complaints were raised among the people, the cry of those dissatisfied was to demand that abuses should be reformed and justice impartially administered as was done in the reign of Saint Louis. In 1230, he forbade all manner of usury, and restrained the Jews in particular from practicing it. He compelled them to restore what they had exacted and, where the creditors could not be found, to give such gains towards the crusade that Gregory IX was endeavoring to set on foot. He published a law commanding all who should be guilty of blasphemy to be branded, and thus punished a rich citizen of Paris, a person of great

consideration. To some of his courtiers who murmured at this severity he said that he would undergo that punishment himself if thus he might put a stop to the crime. However, afterwards, on the advice of Pope Clement IV, he reduced the punishment to a fine, flogging, or imprisonment, according to the circumstances.

He protected vassals from oppressive lords and, when a Flemish count had hanged three children for hunting rabbits in his woods, had the count imprisoned in the Louvre and tried, not by his peers as the Count demanded, but by ordinary judges, who condemned the count to death. Louis afterwards spared the count's life, but subjected him to a fine that deprived him of the greater part of his estates. This money the King ordered to be expended on religious and charitable works. He forbade feudal lords ever to make private war upon one another, a custom that had been the occasion of continual bloodshed and disorders. The scholars and doctors of the University of Paris, upon an alleged infraction of their privileges by the execution of certain students for murder, closed the university for two years. When feeling was worked up to the highest pitch, the prudence of Saint Louis brought about the satisfaction of both parties. His scrupulous fidelity in keeping his word and observing treaties was notable in all negotiations, and his impartial and inflexible integrity made barons, prelates and even foreign kings ask to have him for judge and arbitrator, and put their affairs into his hands. He was extremely careful in his dealings with other princes, not to be drawn into their quarrels, and he used all possible good offices to reconcile their differences.

When he had to reduce rebels, he caused the damage that innocent persons had received, even by his enemy's forces, to be inquired into and full restitution to be made for them. The Count of La Marche again made trouble soon after the King's majority; his estates were a fief of Poitou and he refused to pay homage to the Count of Poitiers, the brother of Saint Louis. Hugh's wife, Isabel, was the widow of King John and mother of Henry III of England, who came over to support his stepfather. Saint Louis defeated King Henry III (who was never born to be a soldier) at Taillebourg, upon the Charente, and the city of Saintes opened its gates to him in 1242. Henry III fled to Bordeaux and the next year returned to England, having made a truce with the French. Fifteen years later Louis concluded another treaty, that of Paris, with Henry III. By it, he yielded to England Limousin, Quercy, and Perigord, and the reversion of Agenais and Saintogne, King Henry III renouncing, on his side, all pretensions to Normandy, Anjou, Maine, Touraine, and Poitou. The French criticized their sovereign's concessions, and Louis replied that he hoped by them to cement a lasting peace between the two nations, and that it was very honorable to his crown to have so great a king as vassal for Guienne. However, some historians are of the opinion that, had Louis pushed home his advantage, the Hundred Years' War would have been averted for his successors.

In December 1244, Saint Louis was seized at Pontoise with a violent dysentery and fever, which rapidly got worse. He became comatose and was thought to be already dead. Then a piece of the true cross and other relics that had been sent him by the Emperor Baldwin were brought, and applied to his body. Soon after this he began to move, and was heard to murmur, "The Light-bringer from on high has visited me by the grace of God, and has called me back from the dead."

Then, speaking with difficulty, he announced his intention of undertaking a crusade to the East (which had been long in his mind), and calling for the Bishop of Paris he desired him to receive his vow for that expedition, and to put the badge of the cross on his shoulder. At this, the two Queens, his mother and wife, fell at his feet weeping, and the Bishops of Paris and Meaux urged

him not to entertain such a thought. But he was not by any means to be moved from his decision and in the beginning of the next year he renewed his vow, and by letter assured the Christians in Palestine that he would make all possible haste to their assistance against the infidels, who a few months before had retaken Jerusalem. However, the opposition of his councilors and nobles, the preparation of the expedition, and the settling of his kingdom put off his departure for three and a half years. At the thirteenth general council at Lyons in 1245 all benefices were taxed a twentieth of their income for three years for the relief of the Holy Land (the English representatives strongly protested against this), and this gave encouragement to the crusaders.

The Queen Mother was named regent, as the King's three brothers and the Queen Consort were to accompany him; on June 15, 1248, he took the Oriflamme of Saint Denis at Paris; and sailed from Aigues Mortes on August 27 for Cyprus, where he was joined by William Longsword, Earl of Salisbury, and two hundred English knights. The objective was Egypt, whose sultan, Melek Seleh, had made use of the Kharizmians, fleeing from Jenghiz Khan and the Mongols, to overrun Palestine. Damietta, in the delta of the Nile, was easily taken and Saint Louis made a solemn entry into the city, not with the pomp of a conqueror but with the humility of a truly Christian prince, walking barefoot with the Queen, the princes his brothers, the King of Cyprus and other great lords, preceded by the papal legate, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, and all the clergy of the camp. Returning humble thanks to God, they went in this manner to the principal mosque, which the legate purified and consecrated with the usual ceremonies of the Church, dedicating it under the name of the Mother of God.

The King ordered that all plundering and other crimes should be strictly inquired into and punished, and that ample restitution should be made. He forbade any infidel to be slain whom it was possible to make prisoner, and he took care that all who desired to embrace the Faith should be instructed and baptized. Notwithstanding all his watchfulness, whilst the army stayed about Damietta many, to his grief, gave themselves up to debauchery and outrageous acts of violence. Owing to the rising of the Nile and the summer heat, the crusaders could not follow up their advantage, and it was not until six months had passed that they advanced to attack the Saracens, who were the other side of the river, in Mansourah. Then followed another six months of desultory fighting, in which the crusaders lost many by battle and sickness, until in April 1250, Saint Louis himself was taken prisoner, and his army routed with frightful slaughter.

During his captivity the King recited the Divine Office every day with two chaplains just as if he had been in perfect health in his own palace, and he also had the prayers of the Mass read (without the consecration) that he might the better join in spirit and desire with the Church in her daily sacrifice. To the insults that were sometimes offered him, he opposed an air of majesty and authority that kept his guards in awe. When he was asked and refused to give up the castles in Syria, he was threatened with the most ignominious treatment and with torture; to which he coolly replied that they were masters of his body, and might do with it what they pleased. The Sultan sent to him a proposal by which he demanded a million bezants of gold and the city of Damietta for his ransom and that of the other prisoners. He answered that a king of France ought not to redeem himself for money, but that he would give the city for his own release and the million bezants for that of all the other prisoners. The Sultan at that time was overthrown by the Mameluke emirs, and these eventually released the King and the other prisoners on these terms, but the sick and wounded crusaders in Damietta they treacherously slew. Saint Louis then sailed to Palestine with the remainder of his army. There he remained until 1254, visiting all the holy places he could, encouraging the Christians, and strengthening the defenses of the Latin

kingdom—such as it was. Then, news being brought to him of the death of his mother, the Queen Regent, he returned to France.

He had been away almost six years, but he was oppressed by the memory of the distresses of the Christians in the East and he continued to wear the cross on his clothes to show that he intended to return to their assistance. Their position got rapidly worse: between 1263 and 1268, the Mameluke Bibars took Nazareth, Caesarea, Jaffa, and Antioch.

The Treaty of Antiens with Henry III of England in 1258 has been mentioned. Five years later Henry and his barons, having exhausted the realm by their disputes, agreed on both sides to make Saint Louis their judge, and engaged themselves to submit to his decision, so great was the opinion of his wisdom, equity, and uprightness. The King and Queen of England, Prince Edmund, and many bishops and lords of their party, and a great number of the confederate barons on the other side, came to Amiens. Saint Louis, after both parties had pleaded, by a definitive sentence annulled all the articles granted by Henry to the barons in the “Mad Parliament,” called the Provisions of Oxford, as being extorted by compulsion and as innovations injurious to the royal majesty; but he confirmed to the barons their ancient privileges. About 1257 Master Robert de Sorbon, a canon and very learned doctor of Paris, laid the foundations of that theological institute in the city that became known after him as the Sorbonne. Master Robert was a personal friend of Saint Louis and sometimes acted as his confessor, and the King enthusiastically seconded his project, helped to endow it, and obtained for it the approbation of Pope Clement IV. It became practically the theological faculty of the University of Paris and, until the rise of Jansenism and the Revolution, it was one of the chief schools of Europe.

The King also founded in Paris, for poor blind men, the hospital of Quinze Vingt, so called because there were in it at the first foundation three hundred such patients. He likewise made provision of all kinds for the poor. In addition to thirteen special indigent guests, a large number of poor folk attended meals near his own palace, and in Lent and Advent all who presented themselves. Often, he served all these in person. He kept lists of needy people, especially *les pauvres honteux*, whom he regularly relieved in every province of his dominions. Though not personally a legislator he had a passion for justice, and he transformed the feudal “king’s court” into a highly organized royal court of justice and, as has been shown, sovereign princes submitted their difficulties to his ruling. In all causes, he endeavoured to substitute proof by witnesses and decision by judicial process or arbitration for appeal to arms.

Having one day stood godfather to a Jew who was baptized at Saint Denis, Saint Louis said to the ambassador of the Emir of Tunis, that to see his master receive that sacrament he would with joy pass the rest of his life in chains under the Saracens.

Accordingly, people were not surprised or pleased when in 1267 he announced another crusade. Among less worthy reasons, they feared to lose so good a king, who if only fifty-two years old was weak with toil, ill health, and austerities. Joinville bluntly said, “those who recommended this voyage to the king sinned grievously.” To prepare himself for the crusade Louis made two retreats at Maubuisson. The Pope granted him the tenth penny of all ecclesiastical revenues towards the expense. He also levied a capitation upon his subjects. During his absence, he nominated Matthew, Abbot of Saint Denis, and Simon of Clermont, persons of known probity and prudence, to the regency of the kingdom because the King’s three eldest sons, Philip, John, and Peter, took the cross to accompany him. Joinville excused himself, urging the necessity of

his staying at home to protect his vassals from the oppression of the Count of Champagne.

The King embarked with his army at Aigues-Mortes on July 1, 1270. When the fleet was over against Cagliari in Sardinia, it was resolved to proceed to Tunis, where Louis had been deceived into thinking that the Emir would be converted and join him. He soon found out his mistake after landing at Carthage, and encamped there to await the arrival of the forces of his brother, the King of Sicily, before attacking Tunis. Dysentery and other sickness broke out among the crusaders, and Saint Louis's second son, John Tristan of Nevers, who had been born at Damietta, died. On the very same day, the King himself and his eldest son Philip both sickened and it was soon seen that Louis was dying.

He gave his last instructions to his sons and to his daughter, the Queen of Navarre, settled his other affairs, and composed himself for death. He prayed with many tears that God would enlighten and show mercy to infidels and sinners, and that his army might be led back into its own country without falling into the hands of the enemy and that none of them might be tempted through weakness to deny Christ. On August 24, which was Sunday, he received the last sacraments, and called for the Greek ambassadors, whom he strongly urged to union with the Roman Church. He lost his speech the next day from nine till twelve o'clock; then, recovering it and lifting up his eyes towards Heaven, he repeated aloud the words of the psalmist, "Lord, I will enter into Thine house; I will adore in Thy holy temple, and will give glory to Thy name."

He spoke again at three in the afternoon, saying, "Into Thy hands I commend my soul," and immediately after breathed his last. His bones and heart were taken back to France and enshrined in the abbey-church of Saint Denis, where they were scattered in the Revolution. He was canonized by Pope Boniface VIII in 1297.

The heroic virtue of Saint Louis shone brighter in his afflictions than it could have done amidst the greatest triumphs. He longed to see the faith of Christ and His love reign throughout the whole world, especially in that country which He had sanctified by His bodily presence on earth; but God was pleased that he should rather glorify Him by his sufferings. Louis found his comfort in the accomplishment of His holy Will. Seeing his good designs defeated, his army destroyed, and himself in the hands of infidels, Louis declared that he found more joy in his chains than he could have done in the conquest of the world. Nothing can show more clearly the principles upon which Saint Louis conducted his life, both as a man and as a king, than the written instructions that he left for his son Philip.

Saint Louis IX, Pray for us
